

Exploring the effects of age and gender in sociolinguistic perception: Evidence from Tyneside English

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Sociolinguistic research has shown that both intralinguistic factors (e.g., differences in the perception of morphosyntactic and phonetic variables, see Levon & Buchstaller 2015) and extralinguistic factors, such as age, socioeconomic status, and gender (e.g., Campbell-Kibler 2007), play a vital role in the perception process. The aim of the current study is to expand this paradigm by exploring how the perception of (ing), a well-documented stable linguistic feature, is mediated both age and gender, using sound samples from Tyneside English speakers.

Tyneside English is well described regarding the processes of variation and change in production (Watt 2002, Buchstaller & Corrigan 2015, *inter alia*). To date, however, the variety has only been subject to relatively few perception experiments, none of which examines the relevance of speaker and listener age for sociolinguistic perception of change in progress (Buchstaller & Levon 2015, Levon, Buchstaller, Mearns 2020). This study addresses this gap by exploring the relevance of maturation in the perception of stimuli-rich speech samples from the North East of England. It draws on naturally occurring sound samples from eight speakers who differ in age and gender. Careful sampling of the large LaVaLi corpus, that contains approximately 100 hours of sociolinguistic interviews, ensures that the guises were stringently controlled for sound quality, fundamental frequency as well as voice quality. Each speech stimulus is about ten seconds in length.

Using an online survey surface (Psychopy), the samples were played to two listener groups in an inter-speaker design: half of the informants listening to the stimuli were asked to rate the speakers on a “professionalism” scale in the context of a job application. The other half of informants were told that the speakers were introducing themselves to a local volunteer group via voice message. This listener group was then asked to respond according to perceived friendliness. Finally, participants answered questions regarding their attitudes towards the North East varieties (e.g. North, North East, Newcastle) and – to explore the impact of cognitive factors – they filled out the diagnostic questions of the BAPQ (Hurley et al. 2007). In a mixed effects regression model, the effects of age, gender, attitudes, and results of the BAPQ were tested. Results suggest that the perception of vernacular linguistic features is highly contingent on both speaker and listener age.

While previous work has focused on the effect of (perceived) speaker gender, the present paper reveals the intersectional nature of gender and age in sociolinguistic perception. These findings allow us to develop a more holistic understanding of the cognitive underpinnings of age-related variability in language perception. They also produce important perceptual information to inform our models of language change across the lifespan.

References:

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